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Strengthening the role of the United Nations in enhancing the effectiveness of the principle of periodic and genuine elections and the promotion of democratization

Report of the Secretary-General**

Summary

The present report describes the work of the United Nations over the previous biennium in providing electoral assistance, and in particular in implementing General Assembly resolutions 54/173 and 56/159. It presents an analytical framework that describes the role that elections play in furthering a number of goals of the Organization, including conflict prevention, peace-building and development. Stressing the role of the focal point for electoral assistance activities, it describes how the various parts of the United Nations system work in close coordination to provide electoral assistance that is effective, prompt and consistent with the body of experience that has been built up over the previous decade. In describing technical assistance provided to Member States, the report notes a number of new and increasingly complex trends, including that of providing support to technology-based systems and to increase popular participation in elections through improved electoral registration exercises. The report also describes how electoral assistance is increasingly incorporated into major United Nations peacekeeping and peace-building missions, and notes the value of including electoral experts at political negotiations aimed at ending or preventing conflicts. Finally, the report signals that the United Nations electoral assistance mechanisms will need to be enhanced if they are to continue to provide effective and quality support in the face of steadily increasing demands for such support.

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** The present report was delayed owing to the need to reflect information provided by a variety of sources.

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I. Introduction

1. The present report has been prepared in response to General Assembly resolution 56/159 of 19 December 2001 and covers electoral activities undertaken by the United Nations in the period since the previous report on this subject (A/56/344), issued on 19 October 2001.

2. The involvement of the United Nations in electoral activities is rooted in the Organization's responsibility to cooperate with Member States to promote the basic rights enumerated in the Charter of the United Nations and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 21 of the Declaration states that "Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives", and that "The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures."

3. It has become clear over the years that where these rights to political participation were not respected, political oppression became the norm, often leading to either the explosion of societies through violence, or implosion through lasting tyranny. The guiding principle of United Nations electoral activities is therefore to assist Governments, at their request, to ensure that the people whom they govern are able to play a free and active role in choosing their Governments.

4. Experience has also shown that, just as the price of exclusion is often violence, the benefit of political inclusion is a much better prospect of stability. The free and fair competition of various political interests through effective institutions provides a non-violent avenue for resolving differences within a polity, and the outcome of this process tends towards a just mean that removes the incentive for violence. Political stability, thus achieved, in turn provides the basis for economic development and, often, for peaceful relations between States. Elections are simultaneously a mechanism for conflict prevention and peace-building, and thus condition the success of a large number of United Nations activities carried out by a large number of agencies, organs and funds.

5. The United Nations essentially provides four categories of electoral assistance: (a) technical assistance; (b) the organization and conduct of elections; (c) observation or monitoring of elections; and (d) participation where elections are expected to play a significant role in the peace-building phase of political negotiations. This assistance is provided in two sorts of political contexts: those that are politically stable, and conflict or post-conflict contexts. Technical assistance tends to be provided in politically stable contexts, while the organization and conduct of elections happens almost exclusively under post-conflict conditions (for example, East Timor; see paras. 44-46 below). The fourth category of assistance, participation in the context of peace negotiations, is a relatively recent development, though recent experience (for example, in the occupied Palestinian territory; see para. 36 below) suggests that it is highly valuable and should be encouraged.

6. The provision of technical assistance continues to increase in complexity. This is in part because an earlier generation of electoral reforms has been consolidated and countries are now demanding more specific and specialized reforms. The introduction of new voting technologies (see paras. 29-31 below) has added further complexity to technical assistance, which demands increased specialization. At the

same time, the demand for technical assistance continues to grow, confirming trends reported in the previous report. The growing emphasis on capacity-building, in particular, has led to several new pilot projects, such as new methodologies developed by the Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections project (see para. 23 below) that will have broad implications for sustainability. The United Nations continues to receive a growing number of requests, due to its experience, its impartiality and the legitimacy it imparts, and because Member States are confident that the United Nations is able to provide electoral assistance while fully respecting national sovereignty.

7. Contrary to previous expectations, the provision of electoral assistance as a component of major peacekeeping and peace-building missions has increased rather than decreased. During the review period, the Electoral Assistance Division has worked with major United Nations Missions in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sierra Leone. This is in part a reflection of the fact that the number of missions has increased in response to recent geopolitical events, but also a reflection of increasing recognition of the role that elections can play in solidifying peace-building efforts and providing alternative dispute resolution mechanisms that can replace the use of violence. The complexity of these forms of assistance has also increased. For this reason, new methodologies, such as the feasibility study conducted in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (see paras. 53-54 below), provide a tool to ensure the consistency of international aid to the electoral process. The role of voter education, in particular, becomes an extremely important mechanism to re-enfranchise people who, after years of war, have ceased to consider themselves as political agents with objective rights.

8. As the provision of technical assistance has increased, requests for direct United Nations electoral observation has decreased. This is in part because the United Nations never observes elections that it organizes or conducts, owing to the obvious conflict of interests. Nonetheless, during the review period, the United Nations coordinated international observers in Sierra Leone, carried out an observation mission for the elections in Fiji in 1999 and monitored the 2000 elections in Solomon Islands.

9. The United Nations system has responded to the increase in quantity and complexity of requests over the previous biennium by doing more with existing resources through enhanced cooperation with partners inside and outside the system. A threshold has been reached, however, beyond which greater resources will be required if the United Nations is to be able to effectively respond to all justified requests.

II. Implementation of General Assembly resolutions 54/173 and 56/159

A. Consolidation of electoral assistance capacities within the United Nations system

10. Given the wide variety of sectors on which electoral activities ultimately have an impact, the United Nations system must work as a single body. The note of guidance attached to the previous report (A/56/344, annex II) continues to form the basis for this cooperation. The development, in practice, of excellent working

relationships with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has ensured that the United Nations system is providing electoral assistance in a coherent and consistent manner all over the world.

11. The consistency of electoral assistance is a key element of its credibility, and a key function of the consolidation of electoral assistance capacities within the United Nations system. As required by the note of guidance, the United Nations focal point for electoral assistance activities, the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, continues to play an essential role as the first formal point of contact for the receipt and evaluation of assistance requests. The Electoral Assistance Division continues to assist the focal point in evaluating these requests, coordinating the provision of electoral assistance by the United Nations system and ensuring a consistent application of standards for the duration of a given project. This methodology removes randomness from the consideration of requests and ensures a standardized approach to the provision of electoral assistance. A consistent approach to technical assistance ensures that key factors, such as the widest possible enfranchisement of voters and the existence of a free press, are respected in democratic processes. And while the design and implementation of each electoral assistance project takes into account the particularities of the local context, it does not do so at the expense of global consistency.

12. Consistency is also enhanced by having adequate time for assistance requests to be considered. The note of guidance therefore refers to a lead time of four months prior to the scheduled elections. This is to allow sufficient time for the conduct of a needs-assessment mission, resource mobilization and the recruitment and deployment of appropriate international expertise prior to the holding of elections. The procedures outlined in the note of guidance have, during the past biennium, helped Member States to submit requests earlier than before and this in turn has enabled the Electoral Assistance Division to respond positively in an increasing number of cases and to enhance the quality of the assistance it provides.

13. In accordance with its mandate, the Electoral Assistance Division maintains a roster of election experts that now includes approximately 1,100 individuals from every region, with a variety of language skills, fields of expertise and levels of experience. Some 25 per cent of the experts on the roster are women. The Division would welcome additional candidates for the roster; details and minimum requirements are available on the Division's web site (www.un.org/dpa/ead).

14. The focal point also acts, through the Electoral Assistance Division, as a clearing house for election-related information. This role is enhanced by the Division's relationships with organizations both inside (see paras. 15-21 below) and outside (see paras. 22-25 below) the United Nations system, and with the electoral commissions of a number of Member States.

B. Coordination in the United Nations system

15. Depending on the type of assistance to be provided, UNDP and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations are two primary partners of the Electoral Assistance Division. Over the past two years, cooperation with UNDP has steadily increased. The field presence of UNDP has been invaluable in facilitating timely responses to requests and mobilizing resources to meet them; its field offices also serve as partners for long-term assistance. Most technical assistance projects are

implemented and directly executed by UNDP field offices to ensure that assistance is fully neutral and outside the influence of specific government institutions. After the initial needs assessment, review of project documents and selection of experts, the role of the Division may range from technical backstopping to full engagement. In other cases, however, the Division remains a fully engaged and active partner throughout the project.

16. In order to strengthen cooperation between the Electoral Assistance Division and UNDP bureaux at the headquarters level, the five Deputy Directors of the UNDP regional and policy bureaux have been designated the main interlocutors for electoral activities in their respective regions. This complements the coordinating mechanisms that already exist (such as participation by Division staff in "cluster meetings" of Resident Coordinators and the holding of regular meetings between the focal point for electoral assistance activities and the UNDP Administrator) and has contributed to the more regular holding of consultations.

17. Over the past two years, the Electoral Assistance Division and UNDP have worked together to design and implement several longer-term and more complex technical assistance projects than have been conducted in the past. Unlike more traditional technical assistance projects, which require approximately six months, the average duration of these more comprehensive projects is more than a year. The role of the Division is to identify appropriate experts and provide substantive monitoring of project activities and achievements.

18. The Department of Peacekeeping Operations is a key partner when peacekeeping missions include an electoral component. Most recently, the Electoral Assistance Division has worked most closely with the Department in planning electoral assistance in the context of three major missions: the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor, the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. The Division also cooperates closely with the Department's Peacekeeping Best Practices Unit, and a chapter on elections has been included in the peacekeeping handbook prepared by that Unit.

19. The Electoral Assistance Division also provides support to the United Nations system through the provision of expert advisory service missions. These missions address a critical stage preceding electoral projects, at which informal discussions occur between the Government and representatives of the United Nations, normally in preparation for an electoral request to the United Nations system, and have proved beneficial in maintaining high-quality and consistent responses to the enquiries of Governments.

20. Additional United Nations partners include the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the United Nations Volunteers Programme (UNV) and the United Nations Office for Project Services. A note of guidance is being negotiated with OHCHR, and existing cooperation modalities with UNV are being institutionalized to make them more efficient.

21. Within the United Nations Secretariat, the Electoral Assistance Division has continued its close working relationship with the regional divisions of the Department of Political Affairs and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, consulting with them prior to and throughout the conduct of relevant electoral assistance projects. The Division also participates, as requested, in meetings of the

Executive Committee on Peace and Security, the Department of Political Affairs Prevention Team and other interdepartmental task forces when issues relating to elections are discussed.

C. Cooperation with other organizations

22. The Electoral Assistance Division has continued to build on its relationships with non-United Nations organizations and to seek new partners as opportunities arise for new forms of collaboration and assistance. The development of ties with regional organizations such as the African Union, the Organization of American States and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe has continued, facilitating a useful international distribution of work and ensuring consistency of approach among the international providers of electoral assistance. A staff member of the Division visited Addis Ababa in early 2002 to assist the African Union with its plans to create an electoral unit. Two technical consultants were later recruited by the Division to follow up with the implementation of the plan.

23. The Electoral Assistance Division has continued its cooperation with the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IIDEA) in various projects and conferences relating to the strengthening of electoral management bodies and increasing citizen engagement in electoral processes. The Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections (BRIDGE) project[1] has been undertaken by the Division, IIDEA and the Australian Electoral Commission to provide a basis for capacity-development programmes.

24. Based on its positive experience in working together with the Australian Election Commission, Elections Canada and the Federal Electoral Institute of Mexico, the Electoral Assistance Division has established new partnerships with several national election administrations through the signing of memorandums of understanding with their Governments. In the past two years, memorandums of understanding have been signed with Argentina, Brazil and Panama, and discussions are currently under way with representatives of India. Among the goals of such relationships are exchange of knowledge and experience, expansion of the United Nations roster of electoral assistance experts, enhanced coordination of activities, exchange of experts and the provision of personnel and logistical and technical assistance for United Nations electoral activities.

25. The second Global Electoral Organization (GEO) Network Conference was held in March 2003, hosted by the Mexican Federal Electoral Institute (IFE). In addition to IFE and the Government of Mexico, IIDEA, Elections Canada and the Electoral Assistance Division sponsored the conference, which brought together a global group of regional associations of election officers, thus helping create a network of electoral associations to establish partnership opportunities and share experiences in the development of association programmes and capacities.

[1] BRIDGE, divided into 10 modules, provides a theoretical background and series of lesson plans to impart the knowledge and skills that mid- to executive-level electoral administrators require. The BRIDGE project provides a broad basis upon which country-specific programmes can be customized and delivered under a variety of circumstances.

III. Experience of the United Nations

26. Over the past two years, the United Nations received 52 requests for electoral assistance from Member States and one request from a non-member State. At the same time, work continued on a number of projects that carried over from requests for assistance made during the previous biennium. Of the 52 new requests, the majority (26) were for technical assistance. Three major electoral missions, in East Timor, Sierra Leone and Afghanistan, were supported during that period, and advance planning began for a future electoral mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Coordination and support for international observers were provided in Bangladesh, Comoros, East Timor, Lesotho and Nepal. In several cases, more than one request for assistance was submitted by the same Member State. Due to the long-term nature of the involvement required by some of the requests, assistance in eight countries was carried over from requests that had originated before September 2001.

27. On the basis of formal and timely requests, needs-assessment missions were conducted in 34 requesting States. More details concerning the conduct of needs-assessment missions are contained in paragraphs 32 and 33 of the previous report of the Secretary-General (A/56/344) and on the United Nations web site.

A. Technical assistance

28. The most recent statistics maintained by the Electoral Assistance Division confirmed that, as noted in previous reports (A/54/491 and A/56/344), technical assistance continues to be the most widely requested form of assistance provided by the United Nations. Such assistance can take many forms, but frequently involves specific electoral processes such as registration, training of polling officers, civic education and comprehensive advisory support for national election administrations. In carrying out electoral assistance, the Division has made specific efforts to address gender mainstreaming. These have included: (a) the creation of a subsection of the electoral roster for gender mainstreaming experts; (b) commissioning a major study on gender mainstreaming in elections, looking particularly at how the participation of women in elections as both voters and candidates can be increased; (c) a project on enhancing women's participation as voters and candidates in Jordan, undertaken with the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women; and (d) adopting women's inclusion as a principal planning concern in the design of the voter registration exercise in Afghanistan, including through special measures such as the use of all-female registration teams.

29. One area of particular interest is the use of computer technology in the electoral process. Member States are turning more and more to technology in order to reduce the cost of elections and make the process more efficient. Computerized systems offer a variety of advantages, from better access for the disabled to faster tallying and earlier announcement of results. At the same time, there is a risk that new technologies, if not implemented with sufficient consideration of the systems with which they have to be integrated, can lead to the effective disenfranchisement of voters and lack of trust in the process, and even open the door to problems of sustainability in cases where electoral commissions are unprepared.

30. The United Nations has received a steadily growing number of requests from Member States to assist in evaluating the use or proposed implementation of these new and emerging electoral technologies. Increasingly, the Organization is being requested to provide an impartial assessment of the quality of these systems and to assist Member States' electoral authorities in determining the impact on upcoming elections, as well as those in the not-so-near term. These assessments combine a diverse assortment of issues, including considerations of hardware and software standards, legislative reform, concerns of sustainability and cost, civic and voter education strategies, security and training of personnel.

31. These assessments, and the subsequent assistance in connection with such technology-related requests, are complicated by the absence of universally accepted standards for the hardware or software involved and the scarcity and high cost of experts able to make such evaluations.

32. The second factor that has contributed to the high demand for technical assistance is the field presence of UNDP. UNDP is able to provide continual and long-term support that goes beyond the types of assistance that can be provided in the time-pressured context of an immediate electoral process, and includes post-electoral assistance. The presence of UNDP field offices also provides a constant platform from which short-term projects can be launched in a timely and cost-effective manner. The Electoral Assistance Division, working with UNDP, has carried out both short-term projects, in which assistance was provided for no longer than necessary to address specific problems, and longer-term projects, of several years or more.

33. Such long-term projects were conducted in Nigeria and Yemen. In Nigeria, a two-year project was undertaken to support the April 2003 general elections. The project focused on supporting civil society organizations throughout the country by financing civic education and projects to pre ent electoral violence. In addition, the project supported a consortium of civil society organizations in the training and deployment of about 10,000 domestic observers. In Yemen, a project was designed in early 2002 to support the organization and conduct of the April 2003 parliamentary and local elections, and to provide post-election support. UNDP and the Electoral Assistance Division mobilized more than $2.2 million from the international community to finance the first phase of a planned four-year capacity-building programme for the Supreme Commission for Elections and Referenda. In May 2003, the first phase was successfully completed and a thorough evaluation conducted. A longer-term objective of the project, institutional capacity-building, will be consolidated in subsequent phases (2003-2006).

34. In Jamaica, on the other hand, at the request of the Government in advance of the 2002 parliamentary elections, the Electoral Assistance Division and UNDP developed a short-term programme to support and enhance the investigative and legal capacities of the Jamaican electoral authorities and Political Ombudsman. The support was aimed at helping these authorities to investigate electoral complaints more rapidly and consistently in order to minimize periods of uncertainty following elections and reduce political violence. While the impact of this assistance is difficult to quantify, in contrast to the previous election no deaths were attributed to political violence in the 2002 election and post-election environment.

35. Over the past two years, technical assistance has been increasingly requested in countries that are considering a major review and reform of existing systems.

These requests may reflect a perceived lack of public trust in the existing system or a desire to update and modernize. In Colombia, the Electoral Assistance Division and UNDP are conducting a six-month preparatory assistance programme aimed at reforming Colombia's electoral system. The programme addresses institution-building, capacity-building, civic education, political party development and the civil registration process. A major innovation of the project was the decision, negotiated with the Colombian Government, to prepare an inventory of all previous reform initiatives, many of which overlapped or contradicted each other. The inventory exercise allows for the preparation of a critical path towards a coherent reform, and the electoral assistance project in Colombia is assisting the Government to manage this complex reform process.

36. In another innovative but sui generis project, in the occupied Palestinian territories, the Electoral Assistance Division and UNDP have begun working with the Palestinian Authority to build an institutional capacity to hold elections. The road map to resolve the Middle East crisis calls for elections to be held in the occupied Palestinian territories but does not specify when. The United Nations recognized that, given the nature of the political process, elections could be called at short notice; it was therefore imperative that the local institutions be capable of holding elections whenever they were called. A failure to be able to hold elections for technical, rather than political, reasons could lead to outright violence or could gradually sap the momentum of the process. It was also recognized that technical decisions regarding the elections could be taken in an environment that would be less politically charged than a pre-election environment, when all political actors are focused on the upcoming polling.

37. Technical assistance requests frequently relate to the establishment, amendment or assessment of voter registration exercises and their associated record storage systems. Two key trends have been identified: an increasing computerization of voter rolls in established democracies (see para. 29 above) and the increasing inclusion of voter registration exercises as features of transitional processes in post-conflict countries (for example, in Sierra Leone, the occupied Palestinian territories and Afghanistan). This trend has emerged as a response to two factors: the need to prepare for a genuine election with certifiable levels of enfranchisement within a short time frame, and a lack of accurate information about the distribution of the adult citizenship within the country.

38. Within an election process, voter registration provides an example of the intersection of political interests and the technical and mechanical preparations for an election. Knowledgeable politicians recognize that elections can potentially be won or lost at this stage of the process. Thus, the efficiency and equity (real and perceived) with which a registration exercise is conducted are highly politicized and scrutinized matters.

39. A fundamental shift in the registration process has been greater consideration of the use of civil registration databases as the source of voter rolls. In most situations, the information about persons required to produce an electoral roll can be extracted from a civil register, thus reducing the overall expenditure of government resources in two similar processes. The political credibility of this approach can be undermined, however, when electoral authorities must cede some control of the process, often to more politicized ministries, and thus cannot provide guarantees of independence, as normally expected by political parties.

40. The United Nations has been called upon to provide assistance in voter registration exercises throughout the world in several ways: in transitional countries, such as Afghanistan, to substantively engage in the actual organization and conduct of the registration exercise; in countries undertaking revisions to the registration process, such as in the occupied Palestinian territories, to provide expert technical assistance in determining the most appropriate methodology and the operational activities to be followed; in countries amending or creating their registration systems, such as Sierra Leone, as an implementing partner; and, for countries that have undertaken or completed amendments to the registration system, such as Jamaica, auditing the process as an impartial third party to provide a qualitative assessment of the outcome.

41. These examples highlight the increasing variety of election expertise that is now requested from the United Nations, as well as the possibilities and potential value of longer-term technical assistance projects. At the same time, the depth of knowledge required and the duration of many such projects have expanded significantly. Each of these factors has a significant impact on the planning and implementation of United Nations electoral assistance: the increased resources required for such services must be carefully mobilized, with substantive backstopping provided throughout the project lifetime.

B. Major electoral missions

42. During the mid-1990s, the number of major electoral missions declined significantly, raising expectations that they would continue to decline and that electoral assistance would be provided less and less in the context of peacekeeping missions. The events of recent years, however, have belied those expectations, as the number of missions has risen and elections are increasingly seen as an essential aspect of peace-building.

43. The increase in intra-State conflict during the late 1990s led to several peacekeeping missions that included an electoral component, in countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone and Tajikistan. As the United Nations assisted in resolving the status of East Timor, the road to independence was marked by important electoral events over the course of three years. These and other major electoral operations have reaffirmed the need for effective advance planning, ready access to adequate human and financial resources and a commitment to sustained and often multifaceted support. Although electoral processes normally involve similar sets of components, the conditions and constraints of each new electoral context frequently pose unprecedented challenges. Recent experience in East Timor, and current planning for future electoral processes in Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, highlight the continuing complexity of major electoral operations.

East Timor/Timor-Leste

44. Following the 1999 popular consultation regarding the future status of East Timor, the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) was established with a mandate to organize and conduct several cycles of elections leading to East Timorese independence. The elections for the Constituent Assembly, held on 30 August 2001, were peaceful and enjoyed a voter turnout of 91.3 per cent. This was the first election in which the Timorese elected their own representatives.

UNTAET began preparations for the 2002 presidential election soon after the Constituent Assembly election, emphasizing capacity-building for Timorese electoral staff.

45. The experience of the United Nations with the political transition of Timor-Leste to independence highlighted several potential dilemmas that may be instructive for the future. For example, the United Nations and the East Timorese agreed that it was the role of the independent Timorese Government, and not the United Nations Transitional Administration, to determine the post-independence electoral system. As a partial consequence, however, planning for the establishment of a post-independence Timor-Leste electoral commission or management body was neglected in the press of urgent issues that needed to be resolved at independence. As a remedy, the Transitional Administrator and Special Representative of the Secretary-General took steps on the eve of independence to ensure that an interim Independent Electoral Commission would be established as soon as possible on the basis of Timorese nominations. An interim Independent Electoral Commission was officially appointed by the Prime Minister in November 2002.

46. The post-independence Government decided in early 2003 to begin holding local elections in October 2003. The Government of Timor-Leste requested technical assistance from the Electoral Assistance Division for these elections. Although the United Nations does not usually provide electoral assistance for subnational level elections, the Division responded positively to the request, given the special role the United Nations had played in Timor-Leste's independence and democratization process. With guidance from the United Nations Mission in East Timor, which succeeded UNTAET after Timor-Leste's independence, the Division has enlisted the cooperation of UNDP for this assistance in order to ensure timely and comprehensive coverage of the Government's needs.

Sierra Leone

47. In May 2001 the National Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone requested United Nations logistical, technical and security assistance for the organization and conduct of the 2002 presidential and parliamentary elections. Following two needs-assessment missions in 2001, an electoral component was established within the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL). On the basis of Security Council resolution 1389 (2002), UNAMSIL began the task of fulfilling the requests of the National Electoral Commission.

48. Given that UNAMSIL provided technical, logistical and security assistance for the elections of 14 May 2002, it refrained from observing those elections, though it did provide support for 207 independent international observers. This support included the provision of briefing materials and deployment plans and the facilitation of observer accreditation with the electoral authorities. Despite a number of operational difficulties, the presidential and parliamentary elections of 14 May were conducted peacefully and with an impressive turnout.

Afghanistan

49. The Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions (the Bonn Agreement), signed on 5 December 2001, requests the United Nations to carry out a voter registration exercise prior to the holding of elections in June 2004 to elect a fully representative

Government. On 15 February 2003, President Karzai wrote to the Secretary-General requesting the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) to play an essential role in the preparation and organization of the election. The Secretary-General acceded to this request in a letter to President Karzai on 3 March 2003.

50. Prior to this exchange of letters, and the formalization of the United Nations role in assisting Afghan elections, the Electoral Assistance Division had dispatched two missions to Afghanistan: a preliminary assessment mission from 17 to 24 August 2002 and a needs-assessment mission from 31 October to 10 November 2002. In March 2003, the Division dispatched a team of consultants to UNAMA to begin planning the electoral registration process and designing the UNAMA electoral unit that would be responsible for coordinating and implementing all UNAMA electoral assistance. The Division worked with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations in New York and with UNAMA to prepare a supplementary budget for the establishment of the electoral unit and submit it to the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions in May 2003. Recruitment and deployment of staff from the roster of electoral experts began immediately. The bulk of the registration exercise, however, as well as capacity-building for the Afghan electoral authorities, will have to be funded through voluntary contributions.

51. The Afghan elections pose a number of political, logistical, administrative and security-related challenges. There have never been elections in Afghanistan of the scope and standard that are being called for now. A voter registry does not exist, and many Afghans lack any form of official identity papers. There is no electoral commission, electoral law or political party law. Two decades of war resulted in massive population flows, and these have continued during the peace process as refugees — 2.2 million of whom were repatriated in 2002 — continue to return to Afghanistan. Registering the refugee population, internally displaced persons and nomadic communities will be particularly challenging. The need to register and enfranchise women will also require a major effort, given entrenched social traditions, particularly in rural areas. Above all, the security situation remains unstable and has deteriorated in many areas. Throughout most of 2003, nearly a third of the country has been off limits to United Nations agencies because of poor security.

52. To overcome these obstacles, the Electoral Assistance Division, UNAMA and the Afghan Transitional Administration will continue to work closely to implement the terms of the Bonn Agreement and prepare the way for general elections to be held by June 2004.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

53. The Electoral Assistance Division is currently conducting a feasibility study for the conduct of future elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Based on the provisional constitution of the country, the conduct of elections is intended to consolidate the political transition, culminating in the inauguration of the post-transition President of the Republic.

54. The feasibility study marks a novel approach whereby electoral assistance will be designed through the elaboration of a comprehensive set of options with associated benefits, costs, risks and corresponding steps for implementation. The study will begin on 28 and 29 July 2003, soon after the establishment of the

transitional Government, and will be followed by a month of data collection in the field. It is anticipated that the study will be completed during the last quarter of 2003. The study will provide multiple paths for the organization of elections in a country where the physical and institutional structures are either non-existent or embryonic (the most recent census took place in 1984 and the last popular consultation was held in 1964). Particular attention will be devoted to legal issues, logistics and questions relating to the choice of an electoral system. For the international community, the study will contribute to increased understanding and definition of its own role as the process moves forward. It was possible to carry out the feasibility study only because funds earmarked for the Democratic Republic of the Congo had earlier been provided by the Belgian Government to the United Nations Trust Fund for Electoral Observation (see para. 59 below), and were therefore available when it was determined that such a study should be carried out. The United Nations and other electoral assistance organizations may find the methodology of the study useful not only in their work with the Democratic Republic of the Congo but in advance planning for other complex electoral situations.

55. Each of the above-mentioned major missions highlights the importance of advance planning, availability of necessary resources and flexibility in addressing difficult and often changing field conditions. The availability of financial resources is particularly critical, since the timing and scope of such electoral missions is unpredictable until a mandate is provided for an initial needs-assessment mission. As a consequence, resources for such missions cannot be specified as part of a regular budgetary cycle. Since the organization of major electoral missions will continue for the foreseeable future, the need to develop modalities for rapid resource mobilization is a priority.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

A. Challenges

56. The most important challenge facing the Electoral Assistance Division stems from its increased workload. This problem is a product of success. Major missions that were not anticipated at the end of the last biennium, including those in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia and possibly Iraq, will make significant demands on the Division in the coming biennium. At the same time, requests for technical assistance are likely to grow in number and in complexity, and some cases, such as those of the occupied Palestinian territories and Indonesia, will require very significant support from the Division.

57. In order to meet these demands, the Electoral Assistance Division requires additional resources, in terms of both staff and finances. The existing pool of electoral staff will be severely taxed over the next several years. The quality of United Nations electoral assistance depends on the availability of properly trained staff. Even those who are deployed temporarily must undergo a minimum of electoral training. Electoral experts for longer-term missions need to have a solid understanding of electoral issues, the political dynamics of the areas to which they are deployed and the United Nations system itself.

58. In anticipation of the upcoming need for electoral experts, the Electoral Assistance Division will need the flexibility to be able to rapidly expand and contract, depending on the status of each of its projects. This need, as well as that of consistency, would best be met by tapping into capacities that already exist in the United Nations system. It would be highly useful, for example, for institutional relationships within the United Nations system to be developed to allow for the temporary secondment of United Nations staff, both in the field and at headquarters, for the purpose of participating during peak periods in electoral operations. This could be assisted by the development of an internal United Nations roster of electoral experts, who could be considered for various tasks depending on levels of training that could be provided through the United Nations Staff College. This process would almost certainly benefit from more efficient inter-agency procedures for the secondment and loan of staff than those currently in place. In particular, other parts of the United Nations system should be encouraged to consider as a priority the secondment of their staff for electoral activities.

59. The primary mechanism for meeting financial demands is the United Nations Trust Fund for Electoral Observation, established by the General Assembly in its resolution 46/137 of 17 December 1991, paragraph 14. The Trust Fund is a unique mechanism within the United Nations system that meets three specific needs: (a) it allows the Electoral Assistance Division to meet demands that are unexpected and that were not included in the budget for the previous biennium; (b) it covers the Division's "research and development" function — providing for the consolidation and systematization of lessons learned, which in turn lead to the development of new approaches and pilot programmes also supported by the Trust Fund; and (c) it provides funds on an emergency basis for a first rapid response to electoral requests, in particular when UNDP and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations are unable to provide such funding.

60. The provision of sufficient resources, both staffing and financial, is essential to allow the Electoral Assistance Division to fulfil its General Assembly mandate to meet every request, and therefore to maintain the consistency of approach that guarantees the integrity of electoral assistance.

B. Future plans and reflections

61. In any given country, an electoral process requires the coordination of a large number of other political and non-political processes, relating to, for example, educational, judicial, and security systems. In order for a national election to be successful, all of these must work together at the culminating moment of the election. This is no less true for United Nations electoral assistance, which calls for a high degree of coordination between diverse agencies such as UNDP, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the Department of Political Affairs, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Member States have often urged the United Nations to be more effective in coordinating its activities; electoral assistance is one area in which this has been achieved to a significant degree. The roles of the various parts of the United Nations system have been clearly defined, and a decade of experience and lessons learned have greatly improved the practical implementation of these cooperation modalities.

62. It is therefore all the more important that the United Nations maintain this level of cooperation, enabling it to continue to provide in the future, as it provides now, clear procedures for the requesting of electoral assistance, and clear responsibilities for its implementation. The rising complexity and number of demands will, however, tax the existing architecture of cooperation. If this architecture is not strengthened through the provision of additional resources and capacity, the increasing burden could eventually weaken it, and electoral assistance would be at risk of becoming less constant, less effective and of a lower quality. As was stated in the previous report, electoral assistance provided by the United Nations continues to be extremely successful, and continues to be threatened by that very success.